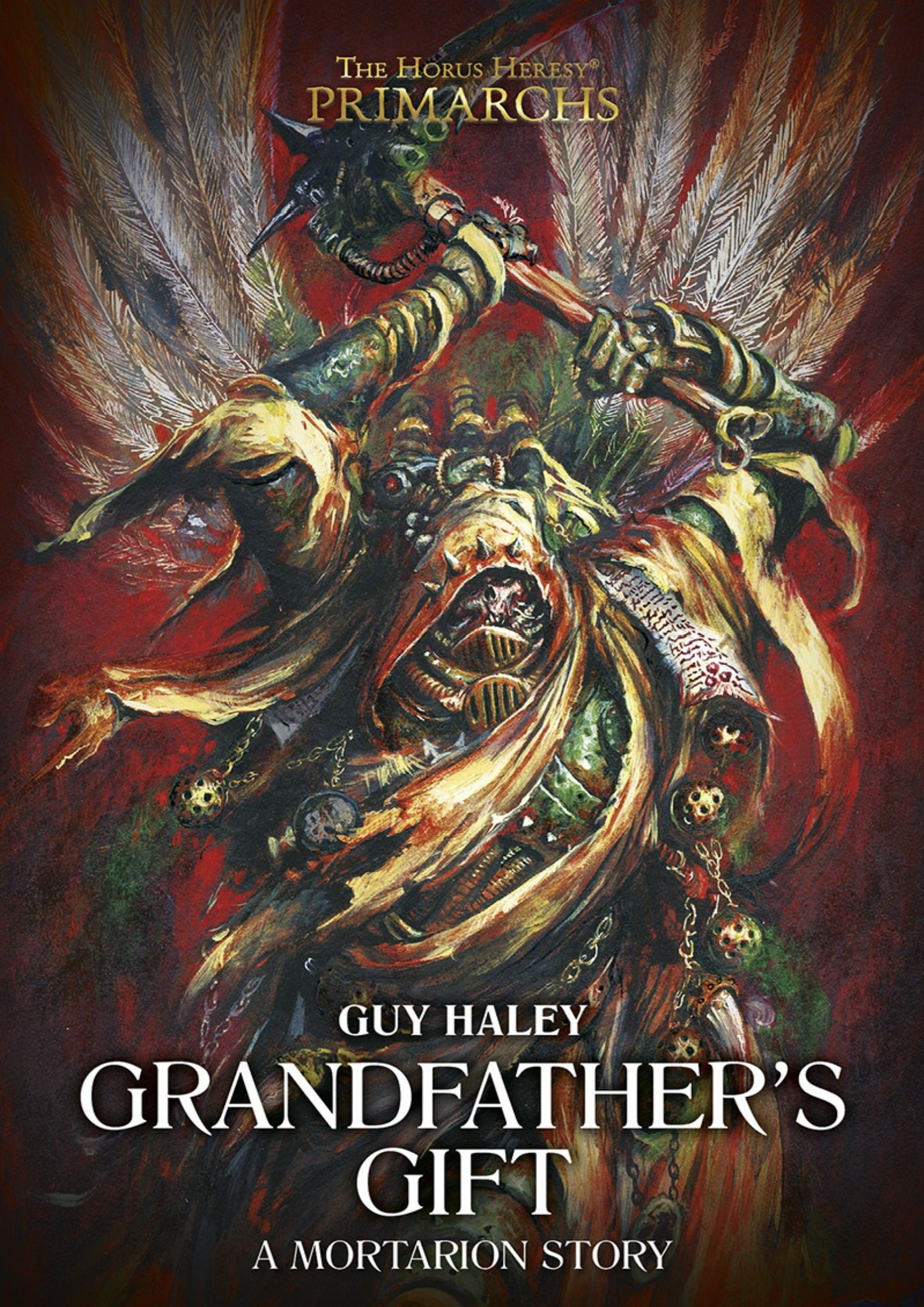
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GUY HALEY
GRANDFATHER'S GIFT
A MORTARION STORY

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GRANDFATHER’S GIFT

Guy Haley

There once was a being who was divided by himself. Opposed in all he was, contrary, and doomed.

This being was man who was not a man. He was a sorcerer who despised magic. He was a saviour who had turned to damnation. He was a treasured son who hated his fathers.

He forgot all this, for a while, and when he awoke upon the slimy moss, he recalled nothing of his life. For a few, blissful minutes he was without past or prejudice, and knew a measure of peace.

It could not last. A part of his hypocrisy was a desire for knowledge, although he had once judged a brother for seeking the same. His mind set to work assessing its shroud of flesh. He was a he, he knew that instinctively. The first piece of the puzzle in place, his sense of peace began an inexorable retreat.

He was made in the form of a human male, with the bilateral symmetry of a Terran organism, and the feet and hands of a post-simian being. He was not a man. Men were small and weak, but he was strong, improved upon – man made god. His human form caged immortal power. Once he remembered that, he realised he had always known what he was, better than his brothers did.

He had brothers. Peace fled further. Bitterness filled its void.

He sat upright. Strong hands pushed into the lawn. Filthy water welled from the giving surface. He looked around, perplexed, at black trees reaching out coy branches from the mist. Marsh gas filled his nostrils with its fulsome scent, and that stirred another memory. His hand went to his throat and his face, seeking out the apparatus that should cover his mouth, the gas exchange

and vaporator that filled his lungs with the airs of his youth. Finding their lack, a memory of fog-choked mountains rushed back, and with it, rolling onto his tongue sure as a marble down a tube, was a name. His name.

‘Mortarion,’ he said. ‘I am Mortarion.’

He got to his feet and scanned the miserable trees that fringed the lawn. Nothing moved among them but curls of vapour dancing at the decree of gentle currents.

Mortarion looked down at himself. Tall, wan yet powerful, spare of limb and gauntly featured, there was iron strength in the sinews of his frame. Long, lank hair brushed his cheeks. He wore loose clothes of grey, a tunic and trousers, covered with a robe. He never dressed like this. He knew that too. Of his gas mixer and his pistol, the Lantern, the Barbaran plate that armoured him and his scythe, *Silence*, there was no sign. None of the panoply of war he bore everywhere was to be seen. He looked about again, expecting, perhaps, for his armament to be heaped up at the foot of a tree for him to take up. It was not.

A further peculiarity struck him. The form he wore, though it once was his, was his no longer. There had been… alterations. The genetic masterwork of his second father had been perfected by further gifts. Gifts from a true divinity, not the false god his first father was, inured him to all pain and harm. He had been remade into a lord of death. And yet here he was, as untouched as the day his second father had come to find him. He remembered light and disappointment, and a hatred that curdled his soul. Or was all that just a dream?

He could not tell. He did not know. He was as he had been long ago, or not so long ago. He had changed, he had not changed. Both statements appeared to be true.

‘Barbarus?’ he said aloud, his whisper stirring clotted air. No, it was not Barbarus. The idea struck him as ridiculous as soon as he spoke. Barbarus was gone. He had a new home.

Dim recollections pressed at him. His laboratory, high in the mists of another world akin to Barbarus, but so much worse. Experiments with arcane technology. The fruits of his triumph over base sorcery. Technology he was determined to perfect. The technology was not the end. There was a purpose to it… There was something he was seeking, something he had wanted for years. He grimaced in frustration. What he sought, he could not recall.

His head was empty of knowledge, so, like the scientist he was, he fell back on observation, the first tool of rational investigation.

The lawn was of emerald-green moss, so deep his bare feet sank up to the ankles and soaked the cuffs of his trousers. The black trees ringed it; a

predatory plantation. He spied a path of broken stone leading from the lawn and, on a whim, followed it.

He emerged into a wide space. It was square, deliberately planned, he thought, for it was divided into beds of fibrous mulch separated by paths. Crops of fungus sprouted with such unrestrained variety they could only be cultivars. There, all sign of a guiding hand ended. Neglect took away the arrangement's beauty.

The paths between were overgrown. The hedge had gone wild, its rotting boughs brushing the ground. The ornament at the centre was so shrouded in dead growth that its shape was indiscernible.

'A garden,' he said. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the moist atmosphere. 'A garden perfumed with subtle decays and rots.'

It was a garden to his liking. It reminded him of home.

He decided to tarry a while, and began to explore.

Mortarion walked trails overhung with drapes of dripping mosses. They swept the ground like beards, the trees they trailed from stooped and gnarled like old men. Fat flies droned a soporific, buzzing music from blackened flower to blackened flower, harvesting no pollen but depositing a generosity of blight with each heavy landing. Ponds scummed with algae and thick ropes of stinking weed eructed poison gases. Rotting heads hung as fruits in an orchard of trees, whose bark was soft and white as the skin of drowned men. Untended vegetable patches sprouted diseased hands that swatted feebly at the flies devouring them. Gurgling brooks of filth wound their way between meadows of sopping black reeds. Things croaked and twittered in the margins. Little fat creatures stared at him with glowing eyes and tittered with undisguised malevolence. Flapping black birds whose bodies dribbled noxious liquid filled ornamental crags with their squawking.

Mortarion wandered the greenswards, woods and marsh of this garden. He took no particular route, meandering aimlessly. A motionless, sickly green sun burned behind the fogs, its orb bloated by diffraction and warm as a night fever. Time was runny, thick as phlegm for a while, sometimes dissolving into quick seconds fluid as thin plasmas. Years could have stolen by.

Not once did Mortarion tread the same path twice. Not once did he witness the same sight. He found much to amaze him.

All the while his body was under attack, though he was not concerned. His body was inured to disease. Phage and spore sought to take root in his skin. His nose tickled with the repeated inquiries of viruses. Yet nothing could mortify his perfect flesh, and he remained free of morbidity while everything else ran thick with infection and decay. Acidic dews rotted through the cloth of his suit, making it tear and fall apart upon him. Soon he was nearly naked,

and smirched head to foot with foetid matter. But in that garden he felt no shame. He belonged there. Though the peace of his awakening had gone, and the gnawing bitterness that was his constant companion had returned, Mortarion was calm. The sweaty warmth of the sun was delightful. He marvelled at the profusion of growth. He recalled another life, another time in service of his second father, who would deny all this rot and renewal. With the revelation of such splendid, fecund decay he wondered how he could ever have believed in a stable universe. The myth of man's supremacy was laughable in the face of entropy, and so he did laugh, long and hard.

Weeping from afar interrupted his mirth.

His laughter faltered. Mortarion had long since hardened his hearts against misery. He revelled in his woes, and though his own bleak stoicism was affectation, he had come to find those who suffered contemptible. Misery was the natural state of man. It should not be denied, and certainly could not be washed away with tears. Such was the despair in the cries from the mist that it touched upon a part of him long since scabbed over. A human empathy. A human need. An understanding of, and care for, the pain of others. He remembered village women mourning their stolen children. He remembered misty valleys. He remembered the urge to fight to stop that crying.

Before he had time to think, he was heading through a moist thicket and down a hill. Brittle shrubs gave way to open ground, and a hollow in the land opened in front of him. It had contained some sort of folly, or perhaps a fane, but the stones were scattered and crushed into the surrounding mud and the ground churned up so thoroughly that the hollow's bottom had become a wallow filling with creeping, soil-dark water.

In this modest bath sat an enormous being. A huge thing, a giant, stout as a trencherman whose greed had fattened its limbs to pillows and its stomach to a mattress, and whose head was as square and as squat as a cushion sinking gracelessly into shabby old furniture. Its skin was riven with cracks, plagued with sores, troubled with mites and wounds and dribbling rashes. Upon the chest the skin had decayed entirely, displaying greying muscle beneath. A great hole opened into the being's chest cavity, where in the caves of its ribs little beings played and fought over scraps of rancid flesh, miniature versions of the giant they parasitised.

A daemon, Mortarion thought. A daemon of Nurgle. Neither the word daemon nor the name Nurgle perturbed him. The plague god was his master, he remembered, embraced in a moment of desperation. That caused him no trouble either. It simply was.

This daemon was different. Mortarion had treated with these things, he had fought them, he had allied with them. They were capricious but jovial,

laughing as they slew, chortling as they released their pathogens, and joyous all the more as mortal flesh blackened and ran. Not this one. This one sat with its face buried in pudgy hands so that its features were hidden and its horns hung miserably low.

The daemon was so immense its head came level with the lip of the hollow. It was powerful enough to do harm to Mortarion should it desire. He had never seen a daemon weep that way, and his curiosity overcame his caution.

'O Daemon,' he said, speaking the o, for together with d, a, e, m, o and n it made seven letters, and in seven there was power. 'Why do you cry?'

The monster started. Not having heard Mortarion approach, the daemon was embarrassed to have its sorrow witnessed and endeavoured to hide it, flicking away tears of pus, clearing its throat and blinking rheumy eyes to clear them.

'You have not heard of the woe of Khu'gath?' it mumbled.

'Khu'gath? I think I know that name.'

The creature cleared its nose into its hand with a long, foghorn blast, then pawed the resulting effluvia away onto its leathery hide. It wiped its runny eyes upon blubbery forearms and nodded earnestly.

'Yes, Lord Mortarion. You and I have fought together many times. We are allies you and I.'

'I do not recall,' said Mortarion.

Khu'gath shifted its bulk and the ground quaked. The daemon moved its giant head towards Mortarion. Its rotting septum quivered as it sniffed. ***'Ah!'*** it said, realisation overcoming its misery. ***'That is because it is yet to happen. It will though, oh, it will. Time means nothing here.'***

That made a sort of sense to Mortarion. Beneath his forgetfulness he knew these things as well as he knew the parts of himself. 'I see. In that case, we are friends.'

'As much as we can be,' agreed the daemon.

'Then tell me, why do you weep, Khu'gath?'

Khu'gath folded its hands in its lap and stared at them. ***'Our master's boon is the cessation of suffering. Fatalists, pessimists, realists, all who acknowledge the inevitability of woe will cease to be troubled by it should they embrace our grandfather. Our master brings joy. He releases us from sorrow.'***

'Yet you are not free of woe.'

'True, true, all too true!' Reminded of its misery, Khu'gath resumed its weeping

'But why?' said Mortarion.

Again Khu'gath swallowed back its sorrow. ***'The manner of my creation. Our lord was working in his manse,'*** it waved one flabby paw vaguely

towards the east, ***'creating the greatest plague that would ever be known. It was never released. I was a mite, a nurgling, a thing no bigger than your hand span. I fell within his cauldron and drank it dry. So potent was the brew that I swelled and swelled, becoming as you see me here.'***

'So our lord hates you?'

'No, no, no!' said Khu'gath forcefully, angered at this slight against their god. ***'Far from it. He loves me, and that makes it so much worse!'*** It began to weep again.

'I, too, brought sorrow on my father, but I am glad of it, for I hate Him.'

'Then you are luckier than I. You have purpose, and though you have no father now, you have a loving grandfather. Who does not know of the great Mortarion! How the garden filled with joy when you turned to our lord.' Khu'gath licked its wide lips with a scabrous tongue. ***'Tell me then, favoured one. How come you are here? Why are you not abroad doing the good work of Papa Nurgle?'***

'I am not here. I am in my laboratory,' said Mortarion, and as he spoke the words more recollection came to him. 'I was engaged upon a search for something.' He frowned. 'Yet I cannot recall what. My machines overloaded. I woke to find myself here. It is strange. I did not think I could dream any more.'

Khu'gath clapped its hands delightedly.

'You do not dream! You trifle with magic. You walk abroad in the realms of the soul. This form you wear here, it is your essence. You pass from the realms of flesh to the Realm of Chaos. You are a sorcerer.'

'It is not magic. It is science,' said Mortarion dangerously. 'I remain innocent of sorcery. My service is performed with utmost rationality. I am in my laboratory.'

'Are you now?' said Khu'gath.

'I am.'

'In the place they call the Plague Planet?'

'Yes,' said Mortarion.

'A planet reformed by your will.'

'A planet reformed by my efforts.'

'I disagree. Did you use machinery or slaves? Did you dig and pile, did you cultivate and plant?'

'No,' said Mortarion. 'I employed the sacred arts of numerology, for in sympathetic mathematical calculation the forms of things may be changed.'

'That sounds like magic,' said Khu'gath.

'It is not,' said Mortarion.

Khu'gath shrugged. ***'As you will. What of this place?'***

Mortarion looked around. ‘It is a projection of my mind, nothing more. The full nature of Grandfather Nurgle is unknowable. This garden is too mundane to encapsulate his being. The garden is a metaphor, the attempt by a limited mind to comprehend the ineffable.’

‘So you created it then?’

‘If it were real I could not create it. But it is not real, so in a sense I did.’

‘I am real. The garden is real. If you made it, that would be magic. You are a sorcerer,’ pronounced Khu’gath with certainty.

‘I am a manipulator of the warp through the application of numerological truths.’

‘Magic, magic, magic!’ said Khu’gath.

‘I will not argue with a dream,’ said Mortarion.

‘This is no dream, my friend. Tell me, do you remember your purpose here?’

‘I do not. I admit.’

‘I will tell you then, for Grandfather knows, and all Grandfather knows, I know. You are looking for your father. Your first father. The sorcerer who enslaved you.’

‘I am,’ said Mortarion, with sudden clarity.

‘You are,’ agreed Khu’gath. ***‘And you will never find him like that. You must be changed.’***

Khu’gath clapped its hands and rubbed them together. With astonishing speed, it snatched Mortarion up and squeezed and moulded his flesh. It hummed as it garlanded the primarch with change. Mortarion was too startled to reply, and could not, anyhow. His wind was kneaded from his lungs and passed over his vocal cords in an accordion wheeze. His bones cracked, his flesh ran. His well-made face was soothed and prodded and sculpted into features new. It was agony. Mortarion was stoic about his suffering. Life was suffering.

When Khu’gath was done, it set Mortarion down upon the brink of the hollow. He was taller, stronger, garbed in his armour and carrying his weaponry. His blood burned with painful energies, and upon a twisted, disease-ravaged face was clamped a breathing mask that filled his lungs with pleasingly toxic vapours.

‘This has been done to me before,’ he said, his voice hollow behind his mask. ‘This is how I am. You did not do this to me.’

‘Maybe I did do it to you,’ said Khu’gath. ***‘Maybe it has not been done until now, and this is the first time. Maybe it is the second time. Maybe this is all a memory. Maybe it is the first and second time, or you are a different Mortarion on a different path to the one you remember. All things are true***

in this realm. You stand in the nexuses of realities, the Realm of Chaos. In this place, all possibilities are true, and all truths are possible.'

'The warp,' said Mortarion. 'I cannot survive there. Can I?' Another memory intruded. He could survive, he realised. He had.

Khu'gath sniggered wetly. ***'If you like. It is the warp, and it is not.'*** It leaned back to admire its handiwork. It frowned. ***'We're missing something.'*** It turned Mortarion around and slapped him hard upon his back, dug its nails in and yanked back. Mortarion cried out as a broad set of wings burst from his flesh and unfurled.

'There. That is as it should be. Now fly, young Mortarion, and catch the quarry you seek. He is here, in this garden. Grandfather Nurgle has given him to you. It is a gift for your devotion.'

Mortarion beat his insect's wings and rose up into the humid air. With every stroke he remembered more of his purpose. At forty-nine feet, he recalled the seven times one hundred years he had searched the warp for the soul of his warlord foster father. He remembered constructing the machines that would let him peer inside the domain of the great powers to seek out the being who had enslaved him. At seventy feet, he remembered the first time he entered the warp, that exultant moment when he had scented his foster father's soul upon the seething tides of the empyrean, and the endless years hunting over plains of living glass and howling sands, and realms of bloody wastes that crumbled and changed and endlessly reformed.

His foster father's nameless kind were mighty in life, and in death retained their ability. He had fled, evading Mortarion for centuries at a time. His art had not been enough to shake off his vengeful foster son.

'Yes! Yes!' said Mortarion. 'I remember! I remember!'

His sojourn in Nurgle's garden had been enforced, he saw, to rest his weary soul, and sharpen his gratitude for the gift to come. Nurgle was a kind god.

At seven hundred feet he could see far across the steaming mires and tangled woods of the garden. Mortarion spied Nurgle's manse, a crumbling edifice larger than some worlds, whose rooms held universes of delightful suffering.

A light winked on the horizon. A soul flare radiated panic that Mortarion could taste, a piquant savour like wine gone to vinegar.

He raised his scythe in thanks to the plague god, and soared away across the land towards his fleeing foster-sire.

Not long now. The effort of hundreds of years was coming to a close. The soul light of his foster father blinked and pulsed. The afterlife was a perilous place. Souls teemed and whirled in great shoals upon its currents. Some might return to corporeal existences, others became things greater or lesser than the beings they had been. Many more were torn to shreds by the warp's voracious

predators. Others simply faded to nothing.

Not his foster father. His xenos species was steeped in empyrical power. He remained whole. Might like that was rare. Though his kind were extinct in the flesh, their souls lingered in the warp.

Mortarion flew towards his prey. Triumph propelled him at incredible speed. The beating light of his foster father's soul turned sour marshes into sheets of bronze. Such power was necessary to maintain the coherency of his essence after all this time. It was no avail. He would be caught. Mortarion's foster father was afraid.

One moment the soul moved with the darting action of a spirit light, the next it coalesced into something approaching the form it had worn in life, floundering through the wetlands on trembling legs.

Mortarion dipped behind it and drove it on. A ghostly, alien face looked back, and the soul sprang up into a point of blue light and surged ahead.

There was no danger of escape. Mortarion had it now.

The Garden of Nurgle, if such a thing can be said to exist, is so vast that it has no edge. The pursuer and the pursued came to the edge nonetheless, a place where sopping lawns gave way to an infinity of surging energy. The line between the two was far from certain. The garden had a ragged coastline, full of bights and bays where the ocean of souls invaded into its territories, and long headlands that extended outwards in counter-attack. Past the contested territory, islands floated. Furthest out stood a lonely tree, its massive boughs dangling noosed cadavers. And there the realm of Nurgle ended in one sense, though not in others. Turned upside down and all about, and the landscape was different. Seen through another's eyes, different again. From a certain point of view, it was not a landscape at all, nor had it ever been.

A burning light shone far on the non-horizon, a pure, ceaseless light. Mortarion kept his eyes from it.

Radiating pulses of terror, the soul of Mortarion's foster father leaped from the edge of Nurgle's realm and screamed in victory at its freedom. Mortarion allowed him these last few seconds. At the precise moment of escape, the primarch deftly hooked the soul around the middle with his scythe, and pulled it in. The soul's cries turned to despair.

With deft, swift movements of *Silence*, Mortarion dismembered the essence of his screaming father, leaving it as glowing shreds. He plunged a bony hand inside his robes and pulled out a glass flask whose lid unscrewed and fell to the dying grasses without physical intervention. Like a child scooping fauna from a pond, he caught the glowing fragments in the flask, swishing it back and forth until not a wisp remained.

He lay *Silence* down, took up the flask's lid and screwed it on tightly, then

held the glass up to his eye. A tiny, screaming face manifested within and was snatched away by its own agonies.

‘On that day, so long gone, the Emperor stole my victory over you,’ Mortarion gloated. ‘At last my vengeance is complete. You are mine to do with as I see fit. A tiny prison to match the one you gave me. Endless torment, in repayment for your unkindnesses.’

The empyrean swam as in a heat haze, holes appearing in the view. The garden became less real, sinking back into the churn of the warp now Mortarion’s thoughts were elsewhere. Displacing the fading landscape and seething eternity was a room of black stone crammed with alchemical glassware and thumping machines that arced lightning.

Mortarion’s person and memory were fully restored. His bitterness multiplied a hundredfold.

Before the warp faded from view, he looked to the burning light in the distance and he swore.

‘One day, Father, I will come for you, too.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Pharos*, the Primarchs novel *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia* and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dante*, *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

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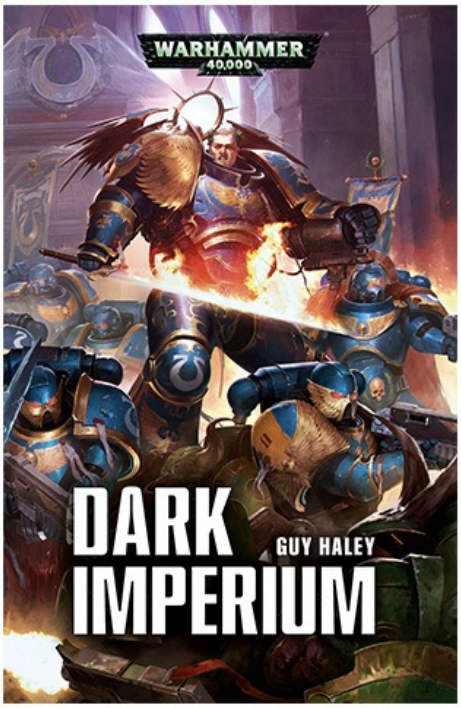

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